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ABSTRACT

Statistics suggest that American Indian higher education in Oklahoma has made significant progress over the past quarter century. However, a new era of higher education is beginning in which higher admission standards, higher tuition costs, and decreased financial aid will take their toll on American Indian enrollment. An estimated 25-40% of potential American Indian students will not enroll in Oklahoma colleges during 1990-91 due to higher admission standards. Universities maintain that minority enrollments will not be affected by the new standards, but such statements are usually based on the rather demeaning practice of allowing a percentage of minority students to enroll under lesser standards. Due to the political consequences, liabilities, and lack of respect involved in being tagged as a "spokesman," only a few individuals and organizations have been willing to speak out on Indian affairs. Tribal government, which is in a position to speak for tribal members and which should be the true spokesman on Indian affairs, is rarely heard. It is time for tribal governments to exert themselves and to use their legal, sovereign right regarding the educational representation of their respective tribal members in the State of Oklahoma. This paper contains statistics on American Indian enrollment from 1979-83 in 30 Oklahoma state colleges, junior colleges, and universities. (SV)

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"Oklahoma American Indian Higher Education, ~~1980~~ 1989"

A Position Paper Presented at the Quarterly Meeting of the United Indian Tribes of Oklahoma March of 1989

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Introduction

Oklahoma American Indian participation in Oklahoma higher education finds itself in a precarious situation as a result of the recent emergence of the rising admission standards and tuition costs in many of the state's senior and comprehensive universities. Historically, Oklahoma Indian citizens depended heavily on the higher education service arm of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in attending college. However, where at one time the BIA would/could fund higher education enrollment for almost any American Indian, we find the concept of 638 and the gradual decline of financial assistance. A recent University of Oklahoma study on the retention of American Indian freshmen suggested that a major contributor to the minimum academic progress of Indian college students was the limited amount of financial assistance. Freshmen at OU were literally running out of money before the end of the first semester of their first year of college and were leaving to go to work or to attend a higher education institution closer to home.(MPMs, 1988)

As a result of the continuation of such financial dilemmas and the "refinement of higher education in Oklahoma" emphasis about Oklahoma Indian higher education has shifted from an attitude of "how do we keep them in college" to one of "how do we 'get' them into college". Oklahoma, a leader in Indian education, finds itself on stage with the rest of the nation playing the role of audience, watching and waiting to see what will transpire for its Indian citizens in higher education during the 21st. century. Unfortunately, in the audience is the persistent presence of the "tribal government" represented by various tribal councils with their entourage of apathy, politics, egos, and power plays.

Oklahoma American Indian higher education represents the foundation and salvation of future Oklahoma Indian generations. The general theme of this paper is to suggest what is projected for American Indian higher education in Oklahoma as a result of literature and observation(s) and the potential of Oklahoma Indian tribal governments to impact the projections. The author suggest that "stagnation" has occurred within the commonalty of Indian education as a result of the past decades of growth and progress. This stagnation is extremely prevalent in higher education of the American Indian in Oklahoma as attested to by the unyielding rules, regulations, and requirements of the BIA in relationship to "obsolete" criteria imposed by tribal higher education 638 entities. These points will be addressed throughout the body of this paper as well as the prevailing conditions.

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Oklahoma Indian Higher Education Overview

Statistics.....everyone wants to see some statistics which reinforce your position regardless of the subject matter. Fortunately, such statistics are available as a result of a recent study conducted by the State Regents for Higher Education in 1984. In this study Joe Hagy stated that "in 1982 the National Center for Education Statistics reported 87,700 American Indian students enrolled in higher education during the fall term."(p.) A breakdown of this statistic by states provides a positive perspective for Oklahoma as compared to other "Indian states" (California reported the largest numerical population of American Indians for the 1980 Census. Oklahoma was second in American Indian population according to the same report.) Oklahoma reported 5,139 or 5.9 percent of the total national American Indian student enrollment for 1982 (p.20).

American Indian enrollment in institutions of higher education throughout the United States increased by more than 15 percent from 1976 to 1982(American Indian Higher Education, 1975-85, p.1). Hagy reported that numerically, Oklahoma's "first time" entering American Indian freshmen increased "8.6 times by the fall of 1983 over the fall of 1962. "This compares with a numerical increase of 2.5 times for the general student population. Percentage wise in the fall of 1983 the increase was 2.3 times the fall of 1962 level.(p.16)

Table one lists the ten public institutions in Oklahoma with the largest number of American Indian students enrolled in the fall of 1983 and the percentages of these institutions as compared to the total enrollment of the institution and the state.(p.17)

INSTITUTIONAL RANK AND PERCENTAGE
OF NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS ATTENDING
IN THE FALL 1983

Institution	Rank in Number	%	system %
NEOSU	1	1141	15.5	20.3
OU	2	543	2.4	9.7
OSU	3	432	1.8	7.7
OSUTT	4	384	12.11	6.8
TJC	5	300	2.1	5.3
SEOSU	6	276	6.5	4.9
ROSE	7	249	2.5	4.4
ECOSU	8.5	243	5.8	4.3
ROGERS	8.5	243	8.1	4.3
CAMERON	10	199	3.4	3.5

(A Study of Native Americans In The Oklahoma State System Of Higher Education, p. 17)

In the fall of 1983 there were 5,624 American Indian students enrolled in the public sector of Oklahoma higher education (p.16). This reflected 3.6 percent of the total higher education student enrollment of 154,464. Oklahoma Indian citizens represent 5.6 percent of the state's total population in 1983. Of the total American Indian enrollment reported, 2,505 (45 %) were male and 3,119 (55%) were female. The Center for Education Statistics reported that more American females than males were enrolled at the undergraduate and graduate levels in 1984 at the national level (p.1).

Oklahoma American Indian college students tended to enroll more at the regional universities rather than the comprehensive universities, whereas such enrollment as compared to the general population is equitable at the two year institutions. Nationally, approximately 50 percent of American Indian higher education enrollment is at the two year institutional level.

Table two shows a break-down of American Indian enrollment over a period of five years for each public institution in Oklahoma. Generally, the institutions demonstrate a "consistent" pattern of enrollment with the exception of Northern Oklahoma Junior College.

TABLE TWO

FIVE YEAR NUMERICAL HISTORY OF NATIVE AMERICAN ENROLLMENTS AT PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

INSTITUTION	79	80	81	82	83
OU	612	606	615	530	543
OSU	359	385	400	420	432
CSU	190	198	228	195	197
ECOSU	215	270	258	227	243
NEOSU	927	967	887	961	1,141
NWOSU	14	16	17	17	16
SEOSU	239	359	374	292	276
SWOSU	112	120	100	77	122
CAMERON	138	156	171	154	199
LANGSTON	3	11	11	17	21
USAO	89	137	130	116	108
PAHANDLE	9	8	14	11	15
CONNORS JR.	97	95	78	98	85
EASTERN JR.	108	107	85	103	116
MURRAY ST.JR.	159	185	139	85	91
NE JR.	136	142	157	152	149
NORTHERN JR.	109	106	90	59	63
ROGERS JR.	161	154	200	185	243
TJC	291	282	333	331	300
OSU TECH	33	49	56	45	40
OSU TRAIN	281	292	314	326	384
OU HSC	66	74	71	75	68
OK OSTEO MD/SRG	7	5	8	7	11
WESTERN JR.	19	26	36	35	38
EL RENO JR.	38	36	17	43	38
CA JR.	145	137	147	123	147
SAYRE JR.	1	5	4	1	5
SEMINOLE JR.	88	103	126	108	110
ROSE JR.	254	236	159	181	249
OKC. JR.	266	231	190	165	174

STATE TOTAL	5,166	5,498	5,415	5,139	5,624

(A Study Of Native Americans In The Oklahoma State System Of Higher Education, 1984)

Many tribal governments are interested in how their tribal membership compares to other tribal memberships in the number of tribal members attending Oklahoma colleges. Hagy's report attempted to answer this question but encountered some problems with validity because of the problem with "tribal membership validation". However, from all indications, in 1984 the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma was ranked number one in the total number and percentage of tribal members attending college with enrollment representing 32.9 percent of the total American Indian college enrollment in Oklahoma for that year. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma was second with 11.6 percent of the total American Indian enrollment in Oklahoma colleges; followed by the Creek Nation of Oklahoma (10.8 percent); Kiowa Tribe of Oklahoma (8.1 percent); Comanche Tribe of Oklahoma (6.6 percent); Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma (4.0 percent); Cheyenne-Arapaho Tribe of Oklahoma (3.4 percent); Seminole Tribe of Oklahoma (2.9 percent); Osage Tribe of Oklahoma (2.3 percent); and the Pawnee Tribe of Oklahoma (2.0 percent).(p.16)

Discussion

A review of the statistics suggest that Oklahoma Indian higher education has made significant progress over the past quarter century. Oklahoma American Indians today represent the most formally educated group of American Indians in the history of Indian-White relations. This statement reflects the extensive, dedicated, hard work of many individuals, groups, organizations, bureaucracies throughout historical and contemporary times. Where at one time the American Indian stood at the" bottom of the ladder" in educational growth and progress in this country, the American Indian can now stand up and say "we have worked our way up to the middle of the educational ladder" in the 20th. century. However, the horizon does not look so clear to those of us who are products of the "golden years" of American Indian growth and prosperity.

It is suggested by the author that during the period of progress and growth (1970s and 1980s) a significant number of American Indians in Oklahoma obtained their college degrees and entered the professional world of employment. During this period an attitude of "we are doing fine in

higher education" prevailed as suggested by American Indian higher education literature. Higher education programs developed by American Indians were implemented in institutions of higher education across the nation and a number of tribes, organizations and/or Individuals had "pseudo control" of higher education monies as provided by the traditional sponsors (BIA, DOE, etc.). The atmosphere of American Indian higher education in Oklahoma had cleared to where American Indians were able to see a light at the end of the tunnel of education. Little did they realize that over the horizon was a "new era" of higher education destined to create, once again, educational deprivation and a possible repeat of American Indian higher education history, especially for Oklahoma Indian citizens.

Critical to meeting this threat was the need for higher education awareness, political fronts and support, professional reinforcements, and valid indicators of higher education progress and growth among American Indian tribes and organizations (data bases). Unfortunately the prosperity experienced during the golden years may have contributed to the prevailing relaxed attitude of the 1980's. Oklahoma American Indian higher education has arrived at this horizon only to find itself unable to make the necessary adjustments to continue a progressive journey into the higher education future. The prosperity has skewed its vision as it attempts to ascertain the future. The prosperity has also contributed to a current selfish attitude of "get what we can for our tribe" prevalent among supposedly Indian leaders (tribal government, individuals, churches, etc.). As a result, the emergence of the new horizon (higher admission standards, higher costs of tuition, lesser financial aid(state, federal, local, meager American Indian representation in education professions, etc.) will take its toll on future American Indian generations and their participation in higher education.

With the emergence of higher admission standards throughout higher education in general, and Oklahoma specifically, it is estimated that approximately 25 to 40 percent of potential American Indian higher education students will not enroll in Oklahoma colleges during the 1990-91 academic year. Those who do choose to attempt to enter college during this time, and three to five years later, will find themselves competing for admission into junior colleges because they were not able to meet regional or comprehensive university admission requirements. Conventionally, universities have maintained that the minority emphasis in higher education will not slow down as a result of the new standards, as compared to previous decades, because of their "allowances" for consistent minority enrollment. Normally this statement is supported with an "exception" clause (universities will allow a

percentage of minority students to enroll under lesser standards) written into the revised higher admission standards. (Personally speaking, I find this exception concept extremely similar to the "Prop 42" concept in athletics. Rather than have a "Prop 42" dummy tag a minority student will have a "five percent exception" card he/she might carry to prove to officials that they are officially enrolled in the university). Whatever the condition, Oklahoma American Indians have not made even a whimper of concern about the potential devastating impact of increase admission standards, or for that matter, increased tuition costs, as related to their students.

Concluding Remarks

Just who can speak for American Indian citizens? Anyone familiar with Indian affairs is aware of the political consequence, the liabilities, the demands, the lack of respect, involved with being tagged as a "spokesman" for Indian affairs. As a result we find few individuals and organizations speaking up for Indian affairs. Subsequently, the white segment always consults with these few people about numerous "Indian related issues" and ultimately receives inaccurate, invalid, myopic perspectives from individuals (some Indian, some white) who begin to think that they are the only knowledgeable people on Indian affairs. As a result these people are consistently found on the Indian affairs boards appointed by the governor, selected by the president, nominated by the Chamber of Commerce, etc.. In reality, the true spokesman never speaks out. Tribal government is in a position to speak for tribal members, who are also citizens of the State of Oklahoma, yet today's society very seldom hears from the tribal government on matters such as education, state and national elections, general social issues, business matters, etc. It is time that the tribal governments begin to exert themselves and use their legal sovereign right regarding the educational representation of their respective tribal members in the State of Oklahoma. Until then, areas such as American Indian higher education will never realize the success demonstrated during the golden years.